

Anna Kőszeghy

## ***The „Smiling Public Man”: W. B. Yeats as Senator of the Irish Free State***

*Poets are the hierophants of an  
unapprehended inspiration.*<sup>1</sup>

P. B. Shelley

### **Abstract**

William Butler Yeats, the poet of the Anglo-Irish literary revival welcomed the arrival of a new era by joining the Senate of the compromise-born Irish Free State. My paper proposes that it is worth looking at what happens if a poet, „*an unacknowledged legislator*” is given seat in a legislative body. Focusing on Yeats’s views regarding three sets of topics: the new country’s diplomacy, language and art, I wish to show why these speeches deserve a closer analysis: they add a new filter when re-reading the poet’s volumes in the light of history (*The Tower*, 1928) and also reveal that Yeats, the „*smiling public man*” proved to be a poet-counsellor, a cultural diplomat and a legislator, however unacknowledged, not merely to the Irish Free State of the time but also to Ireland of the coming times.

**Keywords:** Senate, Irish Free State, Irish poetry, language, art, gaelic, W. B. Yeats, P. B. Shelley, unacknowledged legislator

In the aftermath of the First World War, the poet of the Anglo-Irish literary revival, William Butler Yeats welcomed the arrival of a new era, for he had anticipated it in theory as well as in practice. His theoretical interest was the fact that he had already been writing the first edition of his intricate historical-cosmological prose, *A Vision* (1925) at the time.<sup>2</sup> The practical, down-to-earth reason, however, was that he had been short-listed<sup>3</sup> for a Senate in 1912 in order to become a member of the steadily unfolding Irish legislative body that was to emerge from successive Irish Home Rule proposals.

Yeats’s contributions to the *Seanad Éireann*<sup>4</sup> deserve to be glanced at: these and related recollections form an important segment of the Yeats oeuvre and

---

<sup>1</sup> Percy Bysshe SHELLEY, *A Defence of Poetry*, Ginn & Company, 1891, 46. The essay written in 1821, posthumously published in 1840, was prompted by Thomas Love Peacock’s *Four Ages of Poetry*, 1820.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. YEATS, *A Vision*, London, Laurie, 1925. The second, revised *A Vision* was published by Yeats in 1937.

<sup>3</sup> The 1922 First *Seanad* consisted of 60 members (engineers, countesses, the governor of the Bank of Ireland, lords, marquis, earls, captains) half of them indirectly elected by the *Dáil*, and the remaining half appointed by the President of the Executive Council, W. T. Cosgrave – like W. B. Yeats. „*[P]oets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists.*” – Percy Bysshe SHELLEY, *A Defence of Poetry*, Ginn & Company, 1891, 33.

<sup>4</sup> The two Houses of the *Oireachtas* [ˈiːəxˌtəs] were the *Seanad Éireann* [ˈʃɒnəd ˈeːrən] and the *Dáil Éireann* [ˈdɔːl ˈeːrən]. The *Seanad* was subordinate; during Yeats’s Senate years, it could delay but could not veto decisions of the *Dáil*.

thought, another mask<sup>5</sup> of the poet. As for the country, they constitute an all-important phase of a new-born democracy's initial discussions and debates on self-fashioning. Bills and amendments came before the Senate to be agreed to or declared lost, and Yeats was a part of this body, his speeches representing the most stirring cultural issues as seen by a leading Anglo-Irish literary revivalist. What is more, speeches deserve more than just a glance because they add a new filter when re-reading the poet's volumes in the light of history, especially the one published at the end of this period, in his last Senatorial year, *The Tower* (1928).

The application of such filter could reveal that the self-referential „smiling public man”<sup>6</sup> image is, at the beginning, tinted with self-ironic, diplomat-delegate shades as regards issues of Irish art and language, then transformed into reflections on a statesman's conscience, as in the title poem's declaration „bound neither to Cause nor to State”<sup>7</sup>. It is my impression that all of Yeats's *Seanad* contributions on art and the state involve this delicate arch, this train of thought.

In this connection, it is especially intriguing to evoke Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, a response to Thomas Love Peacock's satirical *The Four Ages of Poetry*. Besides the apparent congruence of Shelley's defended and assumed roles (poet and legislator) and two of the myriad masks worn by Yeats, Shelley's phrase („unacknowledged legislator”<sup>8</sup>) can be appropriated to Yeats for he aspired to embody qualities listed by the English romantic poet, laying the groundwork of civil society and order. In *A Defence*, Shelley considered poets legislators *per se*. What if this legislative possibility or ability is raised to the power? What if a poet, an „unacknowledged legislator” is given seat in a senate? The role undoubtedly becomes manifold, worthy of investigation. Funnily enough, but no surprisingly, Yeats himself mused upon *A Defence* in the beginning of his early essay, *The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry* in 1900, before the proceedings of Home Rule would allow him to consider a Senatorial career. The young Yeats sums up Shelley's ruling ideas by observing that

*In A Defence of Poetry, he [Shelley] will have it that the poet and the lawgiver hold their station by the right of the same faculty, the one uttering in words and the other in forms of society his vision of the divine order, the Intellectual Beauty. 'Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earliest epoch of the world legislators or prophets, and a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters.'*<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Richard Ellmann, YEATS, *The Man and the Masks*, Macmillan, New York, 1948. The idea of masks appears in both editions of *A Vision* (1925 and 1937), probably originating from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, his copy of which Yeats heavily annotated.

<sup>6</sup> *Among School Children* In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 183.

<sup>7</sup> *The Tower* (1926) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 167.

<sup>8</sup> Percy Bysshe SHELLEY, *A Defence of Poetry*, Ginn & Company, 1891, 46.

<sup>9</sup> YEATS, 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry' In *The Collected Works of W B Yeats Volume IV: Early Essays*, ed. R. J. FINNERAN, G. BORNSTEIN, Scribner, New York, 1994, 52.

Following on from this line of thought, the legislative body gained an unusual type of public man. This is also indicated by, on the one hand, Yeats's private letter to a lady friend: „*The Senate amuses me and I think I am quite a useful politician having an inventive mind and no ambition*”<sup>10</sup>. For him, the title would not serve as a basis for practical power: after being nominated for the position of the Minister of Fine Arts, he withdrew from the post, and later became chairman of three committees consecutively. On the other hand, to indicate the same, there was a widely known, public piece of writing penned down in 1920-1921, which was available for the readers since its 1922 publication. *The Trembling of the Veil: Hodos Chameliontos* represents a quality of public men that is rare amongst those venturing onto the field of politics:

*How could I judge any scheme of education, or of social reform, when I could not measure what the different classes and occupations contributed to that invisible commerce of reverie and of sleep; and what is luxury and what is necessity when a fragment of gold braid or a flower in the wallpaper may be an originating impulse to revolution or to philosophy?*<sup>11</sup>

Yeats was definitely astonished by the arising opportunity to restore the value of art. A memorable occasion for man and state was when the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to William Butler Yeats on 10 December 1923. He had been the first Irishman to receive it, „*for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation*”.<sup>12</sup> During his visit to Stockholm – where a rare video footage perpetuated his arrival at the Central Station – he warily kept reiterating his vision to the audience:

*We are going to change the thought of the world, I say, to bring it back to its old truths, but I dread the future. Think what the people have made of the political thought of the eighteenth century, and now we must offer them a new fanaticism.*<sup>13</sup>

Oliver Joseph St. John Gogarty gave the congratulatory speech in the Senate and suggestively complimented: „*Our civilisation will be assessed on the name of Senator Yeats*”.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> David PIERCE, *Yeats's Worlds – Ireland, England and the Poetic Imagination*, Yale University Press, London, 1995, 220.

<sup>11</sup> *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume III, Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'DONNELL, Douglas N. ARCHIBALD, Scribner, 1999, 221.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Nobel Prize in Literature 1923', *Nobelprize.org* [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1923/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1923/) Date of access: 4 July 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Richard ELLMANN, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Macmillan, New York, 1948, 249.

<sup>14</sup> YEATS, 'Appendices, Appendix I: The Nobel Prize' in *Senate Speeches*, ed. by Donald R PEARCE Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1960, 154.

Curiously enough, only a fragment of the speeches has been collected: *The Senate Speeches of W B Yeats* focuses on the three committees Yeats chaired: the Irish (Gaelic) Manuscript Committee (1923-1924), the Coinage Committee (1926-1928) and the Committee for the Federation of Arts.<sup>15</sup> The other book that concentrates on this segment of the œuvre is *W B Yeats Seanad Eireann Speeches 1922-1928* (sic!).<sup>16</sup> It is not only an incomplete collection of speeches torn out of context but also provides inquisitive readers with no analysis or reception whatsoever. Some well-known parliamentary workings are included, yet the essence is missing. Therefore, a wider spectrum of analysis would be preferable – which my dissertation aims at: incorporating (distilled or otherwise) every Yeats contribution from the two triennials recorded in the *Archives of the Oireachtas*.<sup>17</sup> Naturally, each sub-chapter on the contributions could be expanded – this is merely a token, a segment of what will be realised in a more long-winded study.

Readers of Yeats must decide how far they are willing to go to meet him; and in what directions. The present paper would like to focus on views regarding three sets of topics: the new country's diplomacy, its language, and art as seen by William Butler Yeats. I shall try to indicate the directions which seem the most productive.

\*

### **Tradition**

The present-day Irish poet and critic Thomas Kinsella surmised: „every writer in the modern world is the inheritor of a gapped, discontinuous, polyglot tradition”.<sup>18</sup> One might say it is especially true of the Irish – and exponentially true of William Butler Yeats.<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that the poet's ancestors came from the Anglo-Irish Protestant landowner ascendancy, the young William was sharpening his Protestant poetic yet Gaelic revivalist tone as a dedicated Home Ruler. He rose to fame as a figure of the *New Ireland* movement, patronised by the legendary John O'Leary of the *Young Irelanders*, parallel to the country's discovery of independence. In this nationalist school of thought, as O'Leary's devoted pupil, Yeats learned to oppose no more the British themselves but only their rule in Ireland, to serve the nationalist cause with pen and not the sword (or gun). As a poet of the bardic tradition, having utter respect for the myth-bearer peasantry, he collected the *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and the *Irish*

---

<sup>15</sup> *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. PEARCE, London, 1961.

<sup>16</sup> Michael MANNING, *W B Yeats Seanad Eireann Speeches 1922-1928*, Lulu, London, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> The full text of the Official Report of historical debates in the upper (and lower) House of the Irish Parliament: <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/>. Senate speeches are quoted from this source, dates and Houses indicated; delivered by W. B. Yeats (if not indicated otherwise); date of access for all the speeches is: 4 July 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas KINSELLA, *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson? Tradition and the Irish Writer*, Dolmen Press, 1970, 66.

<sup>19</sup> „Born and reared between two communities.” Donoghue concisely sums it up. Denis DONOGHUE, *Yeats*, Fontana Paperbacks, Glasgow, 1982, 23.

*Faerie Tales* (1892) and began composing poems of mythical toolkit so that readers can have a part in ancient, imaginative arts of Ireland.

In his *Autobiographies* Yeats also mentions that he attended meetings of the Socialist League in 1887 – the Hammersmith Lectures in London – organised by his friend, William Morris.<sup>20</sup> He ceased to go there on grounds of holding on to religion and opposing the Marxian criterion of values but remained friends with the English poet and recalled: „*there were moments when I thought myself a Socialist and saw Morris more as a public man and social thinker*”.<sup>21</sup>

In 1911, summing up all of these convictions, he put into words what he thought at the time. The lexicon from which he borrows each is very telling of the myriad traditions and ideas he felt familiar with: „*It is said that we tend to show unfitness of the Irish Home Rule. I'm a worker for Home Rule – I believe in it – I want it, pray for it – and feel assured that Ireland must and will get it, not in the dim future, but soon*”.<sup>22</sup> I read this as a beautiful reflection of different traditions and also of tolerance: a „*worker*” for Home Rule „*prays*” for it wholeheartedly while colouring his stance with poetic epithets such as „*dim*” and enwrapping the whole sentence in one emphatic rhythm.

But Ireland was to survive austerity and profound social disturbances after the end of the Great War, distilled in *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* as:

*Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare  
Rides upon sleep [...].  
The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.*<sup>23</sup>

The pre-war Home Rule Bill of 1914 had been vetoed by the House of Lords, therefore, certain Irish took the reins by proclaiming the Irish Republic and a *Dáil Éireann* on 21 January 1919. These steps sparked the Irish War of Independence that officially lasted until the implementation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1922, signed on 6 December 1921. Though the treaty was lawful and established a new *Dáil Éireann*, much to the chagrin of the belligerents it merely offered a so-called Six Counties Option, giving County Derry, Antrim, Armagh, Down, Tyrone and Fermanagh over to British control and forming a territory named Northern Ireland. Éamon de Valéra and his followers declared this Second *Dáil Éireann* illegal, and having dissociated themselves from all forms of

---

<sup>20</sup> *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume III, Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'DONNELL, Douglas N. ARCHIBALD, Scribner, 1999, 190.

<sup>21</sup> *The Collected Works of W B Yeats Volume IV: Early Essays*, ed. R. J. FINNERAN, G. BORNSTEIN, Scribner, New York, 1994, 358.

<sup>22</sup> 'Interview with Yeats', *Sunday Post*, Boston, 8 October 1911, 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen – I* (1919) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 176.

negotiation, they continued to remain in fervent opposition. In order to grasp the degree of this enmity, it should be noted that the main signatories on the Irish side of the compromise were formerly militant men like Arthur Griffith, the head of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Michael Collins of *Sinn Féin* who favoured a free Irish state over a prolonged war for independence.

The British side involved minds such as Prime Minister David Lloyd George and his then Colonial Secretary, Winston Spencer Churchill. The latter statesman played a crucial role in the designation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. He could not embrace the idea of an independent Irish Republic<sup>24</sup>, perhaps due to a suspicion that it would be perforce hostile to Britain in each and every significant issue arising in Parliament, as opposed to a moderate Irish Free State which had just bowed to the British Crown, took the Oath of Allegiance to the King by signing the Treaty and gained dominion status.

This compromise<sup>25</sup> marked the start of an ensuing conflict, the Irish Civil War between radical Irish Republicans and moderate Free Staters in affairs of the new-born state, and a brand-new era in the history of Ireland – this is where the poet, William Butler Yeats gladly took the floor on the side of the compromise-born, officially recognised, democratic Irish Free State (*Saorstát Éireann*) and became member of its *Seanad*. What he wished was no meddling in the arts by the means of politics but some positive influence of the arts on (the science of) politics.

*Here one works at the slow, exciting work of creating the institutions of a new nation – all coral insects but with some design in our heads of the ultimate island. Meanwhile the country is full of explosives ready for any violent hand to use. Perhaps all our slow growing coral may be scattered but I think not...*<sup>26</sup>

By this, he thought to have found the means of promoting values in which he delighted.

\*

### **Diplomacy**

William Butler Yeats's diplomatic principles were first manifested in the remarks on interstate affairs (in the immediate aftermath of the formation of the Irish Free State) when he urged mutual amnesty to be passed in January 1923. Despite the often passionate and dreamy poetic nature, his Senate contributions are very apropos, for he might have registered the tension between dreams and historical reality, as in his *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, a poetic sequence he

---

<sup>24</sup> Robert KEE, *The Green Flag – A History of Irish Nationalism*, Penguin Books, 2000, 723.

<sup>25</sup> For a fine account of the Treaty negotiations in detail, see: Frank PAKENHAM [Earl of Longford], *Peace by Ordeal*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1935, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Richard ELLMANN, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Macmillan, New York, 1948, 247.

wrote in the midst of the tragic conflict:

*We are closed in, and the key is turned  
On our uncertainty; somewhere  
A man is killed, or a house burned,  
Yet no clear fact to be discerned:  
Come build in the empty house of the stare.<sup>27</sup>*

On Northern Ireland, he held the view and had the ear to draw attention to it, that if „we take the word ‘Irish’ entirely to ourselves in Southern Ireland, [it will lead] to the exclusion of Northern Ireland altogether”<sup>28</sup> with which he kindly asked fellow-senators not to use it likewise in Clause 25, but formulate it as „Great Britain and Northern Ireland”, perhaps in order not to be closed either in or out.

Nevertheless, he did envisage future reunion, but differently from other nationalists. This line of thought is subtly carried onto the Solution of Outstanding National Problems debate a year later. Yeats, in a concise speech, clarified the interpretations of the resolution for those who might have had extreme views on the subject, in order to pin down that President William Thomas Cosgrave’s negotiations with the North „cannot give anything else but the Treaty”<sup>29</sup>. What he said next unfolds his vision of the future and gives ground to his forthcoming points of view on the relations between Irishness and Irish artistry:

*I have no hope of seeing Ireland united in my time, or of seeing Ulster won in my time; but I believe it will be won in the end, and not because we fight it, but because we govern this country well. We can do that, if I may be permitted as an artist and a writer to say so, by creating a system of culture which will represent the whole of this country and which will draw the imagination of the young towards it.<sup>30</sup>*

It was also one of the rare and highly indicative occasions on which he incorporates Edmund Burke, the Irish theorist crucial for what the poet perceived to be contribution to Irish philosophy into his Parliament speech – though Burke is not at all rare in Yeats’s prose (for example *A Vision*) or poetry. The reference deserves attention at this point because of their similar views on the organic structure of nations – roots and continuity. Burke had argued „that the state was a tree, no mechanism to be pulled in pieces and put up again, but an oak tree that had grown through centuries”<sup>31</sup> and Yeats wholeheartedly endorsed this set of values, this organic foundation.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Meditations in Time of Civil War – VI, The Stare’s Nest by My Window* (1923) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 173.

<sup>28</sup> Senate speech, 20 June 1923.

<sup>29</sup> Senate speech, 17 October 1924.

<sup>30</sup> Senate speech, 17 October 1924.

<sup>31</sup> Denis DONOGHUE, *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society*, University of California Press, London, 1986, 6.

Following on from this tangent, it is all the more interesting to have a look at one special occasion on which the compromise-born, diplomatic stance vis-à-vis London contradicts both what was past and what was to come for Yeats. It happened in the case of the proprietary rights of Sir Hugh Lane's paintings: the „Lane Bequest”. The poet admonished the Irish government

*to press upon the British Government the production of the minutes of the Board of Governors of the National Gallery of London for the period during which the promise is stated to have been made. If no such minute can be discovered then the Commission has been grossly misled; if it is discovered, we have. [...] Now what are we to do? No compromise. We ask and we must continue to ask our right – to hold 39 pictures, and for ever.*<sup>32</sup>

It shows that discretion in art meant something completely different. Of course, one should not forget that he, as a cultural ambassador appointed for this matter who took his business very seriously, had first addressed the House as regards the Lane Pictures some two years before. True to his earlier manifestations, he ended on a cautious note by suggesting that Hugh Lane would have liked to bequeath the paintings „where they were not to be lost among the growing richness of the great London gallery”.<sup>33</sup>

There was another cautious tactics in Yeats's contributions when it came to the League of Nations controversy. The Irish government planned to join the League without consulting the Parliament, as a result of which the Senate urged a motion for a committee – perhaps partly to gain time and also information – a committee to be appointed to consider the legal bearings of such an act. Personally, Yeats voiced his fears of the prospect of being drawn into another war on the British side. Many, among them, Senator Thomas McPartlin rose to declare Yeats's motion for setting up a committee „most advisable”, and the Senate wanted it as one man. But, despite Yeats's April and June speeches, the Irish Free State finally joined the League of Nations in September 1923.

### **Compulsory Gaelic**

An imaginary dialogue between Peter, a Senator, Paul, a deputy in the *Dáil* and Timothy, an elderly student was published in the *Irish Statesman* on August 2, 1924. *Compulsory Gaelic: A Dialogue* was William Butler Yeats's modest proposal to revive the language. It comes as no surprise from a poet of the literary revival. Also, as early as November 1923 he declared in the Senate: „I wish to see the country Irish speaking”.<sup>34</sup> But, piquantly, the leading Irish revivalist had „waking

---

<sup>32</sup> Senate speech, 14 July 1926.

<sup>33</sup> Senate speech, 14 July 1926.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard KRIMM, *W. B. Yeats and the Emergence of the Irish Free State 1918-1939: Living in the Explosion*, Whitston Pub. Co., Troy, 1981, 102.



wits”<sup>35</sup>: he opposed a government-level enactment of Gaelic.

The reasons for it were various, but they tend to indicate that he took into account future government roles in education as well as the changing of political boundaries. The cunning of the article’s rhetoric and the shift of roles first trick the audience into agreeing with compulsory Gaelic: he admits the government’s right to enact the language, and afterwards implicitly arms Peter, Paul and Timothy with his own beliefs. What he wished to see was a „country Irish-speaking”, but something completely different. What he did approximates what Beckett put it Molloy’s head: „I did my best to go in a circle, hoping in this way to go in a straight line”.<sup>36</sup>

Putting schoolbook sessions aside, he would have the government spend £5000 per year on Gaelic scholarships and offer the gift of language for it to be admired, to the interested few, and so retain this tradition. „Monuments of unageing intellect”<sup>37</sup> would be able to keep it. This is not mere socio-psychology. Geo-politically, Yeats knew at the very beginning of the boundary disputes that the reunion with the northern Six Counties would be impossible if the Irish Free State had linguistic (or religious) tyranny as part of an extreme nationalist government programme. Careful alignment and balance are necessary. As for ‘national faith’, it was pinned down during the discussion of the Central Fund Bill. As much as the first sentence evoked the great Irish religious spirit from both Catholic and Protestant audiences, the thought that unfolded might have been a waker:

*I doubt if any nation can become prosperous unless it has national faith, and one very important part of national faith is in its resources, faith both in the richness of its soil and the richness of its intellect.*<sup>38</sup>

It was, therefore, not due to the fact that he was a non-Catholic, a member of the Protestant Ascendancy. It was not even the modern man’s despise for an endangered language – he scorned modernity, its anti-religious stance and disrespect for the old traditions and order.

Eight years later, as a private man, he took the issue further in *The Dublin Magazine* and advised the government to send good teachers to those places where Gaelic had already been mastered. Moreover, in 1938, he argued that Irish should be spoken as fluently as English in Ireland.<sup>39</sup> All this would be accomplished with a masterfully crafted, gift-like educational scheme, not a government-imposed policy. During this early Senatorial debate, it was the tyranny of Irishman over Irishman he was terrified of.

---

<sup>35</sup> *Meditations in Time of Civil War – III, My Table* (1923) In Yeats, *The Works of William Butler Yeats* Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 172.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel BECKETT, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, Calder Publications Ltd., London, 1994, 85.

<sup>37</sup> *Sailing to Byzantium* (1927) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 163.

<sup>38</sup> Senate speech, 30 March 1926.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard KRIMM, *W. B. Yeats and the Emergence of the Irish Free State 1918-1939: Living in the Explosion*, Whitston Pub. Co., Troy, 1981, 102.

But there are two lesser-known, highly indicative (not to mention humorous) instances where Yeats's knowledge of the Irish mind is manifested in connection with significant linguistic issues: compulsory Gaelic railway signs and the compulsory use of the newly imposed name for the Peace Guards: *An Garda Síochána*.<sup>40</sup> As for the latter, he surmised:

*The question troubles me very much. If I am attacked by a footpad and wish for protection, how can I call for protection by using words I cannot pronounce?*<sup>41</sup>

What troubled Yeats in general was what would become of the Irish language, the outcome of legally defining the use of Irish-related matters. In this specific case, which somewhat foreshadowed future proportions in the Senate while it existed, he was part of a minority (Benjamin Haughton, Colonel Maurice G. Moore and himself) who suggested options for this amendment of the Civil Service Regulations that translate better, are shorter or, most importantly and preferably, are not necessarily in Irish. Half a year later, in July the same year came the Railways Bill. To begin with, Yeats humbly asked the Senate to throw out this amendment:

*When you put up, as this amendment proposes, a notice telling a man where he is to cross a railway line, you put it up to give him the best practical information. That is the only thing you have to consider.*<sup>42</sup>

After striking such a strong note and still not being understood, he delivered the most impassioned (but concise) speeches on language as it were. Throughout his life, Yeats was enchanted by living up to *The Fascination of What's Difficult*<sup>43</sup> and this time he attempted to clarify how it would affect the language and the general sentiment in a country „full of explosives, ready for any violent hand to use”:

*To put that up in the Irish language is to create a form of insincerity that is injurious to the general intellect and thought of this country, and to create an irritation against the Gaelic language. [...] That is a cause of irritation increasing daily in this country.*<sup>44</sup>

Once again, he reiterates his alternative proposals for teaching Irish but – even though this debate unfolded from the relatively simple question of railway signs –

---

<sup>40</sup> ‘Guardian of the Peace’: the name of the police force of Ireland since 1922. In short: *Gardaí*: ‘Guardians’.

<sup>41</sup> Senate speech, 15 January 1924.

<sup>42</sup> Senate speech, 2 July 1924.

<sup>43</sup> *The Fascination of What's Difficult*, In *Responsibilities and Other Poems*, Macmillan Co., Toronto, 1916, 114.

<sup>44</sup> Senate speech, 2 July 1924.

he utters harsh words that stir some senators into denouncing him as unpatriotic, someone who inflicts damage on the Irish language.

*If the Gaelic League or any other Irish national interest is injured it will be injured by an attempt to force Irish on those who do not want it. Endow creation by scholarships but do not set up a pretence of people knowing a language that they do not know by perpetually printing, and in other ways, exhibiting something in the Irish language.<sup>45</sup>*

Yeats's moderate stance remained unchanged but his formulation was definitely milder than a year earlier on bilingual signs:

*I wish to make a very emphatic protest against the histrionics which have crept into the whole Gaelic movement. People pretend to know a thing that they do not.<sup>46</sup>*

But if we go back yet another few months, we might find the one with the sharpest edge, a retaliation to Senator Edward MacLysaght who successfully proposed to use *An Garda Síochána* instead of „Civic Guard“:

*I think the Senator is neglecting his duty. His duty is to make us all think in Irish, and not to make us all pretend that we are thinking in Irish.<sup>47</sup>*

Unfortunately, this must have been a familiar setting for Yeats. It conjures up the poet's first large-scale clash with Irish Republican nationalist sentiment on 26 January 1907: the Abbey riots. Though Yeats himself understood John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* artistically, there were people who could not. Even then, the poet showed consideration and organised a debate in the Abbey on 4 February for those who found their play blasphemous, unpatriotic, or mocking the folk mind – whereas he insisted on Synge's merits. The equivalent act is Shelley's *Defence* offers some consolation if not else:

*Every epoch, under names more or less specious, has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age: and Self-deceit is the veiled image of unknown evil [...]. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed.<sup>48</sup>*

But the continuation of the riots during the performances of Sean O'Casey's

---

<sup>45</sup> Senate speech, 2 July 1924.

<sup>46</sup> Senate speech, 14 November 1923, on Standing Orders and bilingual signs.

<sup>47</sup> Senate speech, 2 August 1923.

<sup>48</sup> Percy Bysshe SHELLEY, *A Defence of Poetry*, Ginn & Company, 1891, 12.

*The Plough and the Stars* one week later caused Yeats to summon the police force. Ironically, however, they were no longer a *foreign* service that the Irish would have liked to get the needles against. O’Casey remembers that Yeats was not troubled, he smiled and noted: „*I am sending for the police, and this time it will be their own police*”.<sup>49</sup> Finally, he shouted at the rioters from the footlights: „*Is this going to be a recurring celebration of Irish genius?*”<sup>50</sup> This sort of restoration of imaginative art was unclear for the audience: the smiling public man regarded the effect of arts universal, not particular in the play.

It is my understanding that Éamon de Valéra’s verbal attack on a Senator not present, on the ideas Yeats supported is unparalleled in the history of the First Senate. The poet knew his stance was a risky undertaking, perhaps perpetuating suspicions with lines from *The Tower*: „*if I triumph I must make men mad*”<sup>51</sup>. In this Gaelic battle, Yeats had undoubtedly been de Valéra’s archetypal anti-hero, a boring prophet.<sup>52</sup> Towards the end of the second triennial period, on 4 May 1928, he spoke disparagingly of William Butler Yeats in the House of Deputies:

*I suppose the Minister [for Finance] will discover very soon that Anglo-Irish is a much superior language, that we have a special brand of English of our own, that is purely distinctive, that the names of Yeats and all the rest of them have become world-names and that it is a foolish thing to bother about the question of Irish!*<sup>53</sup>

After that, it comes as no surprise perhaps that de Valéra would be referred to as a „*loose-lipped demagogue*”<sup>54</sup> in his later poem, *Parnell’s Funeral* (1933). De Valéra, the diametrical opposite of what Yeats stood for during his Senate years is very illustrative of the opinion that eventually won the day. Despite a good many well-researched and artistically buttressed up arguments, Yeats lost the battle on the mighty issue of compulsory Gaelic. But despite losing the battle, the 1950s Senate and Dáil would be astir with the Taoiseach’s Arts Act, and in the midst of it, Senators summed up what gives international fame to the Irish:

*The Book of Kells has been mentioned, the Ardagh Chalice, Cormac’s Chapel. [...] Our name stands high in the history of the world to-day because of the writers and artists we have produced. Names like Synge,*

<sup>49</sup> E. H. MIKHAIL, *Interviews and Recollections*, Vol. 1 & 2, 1977, 184-185.

<sup>50</sup> E. H. MIKHAIL, *Interviews and Recollections*, Vol. 1 & 2, 1977, 165.

<sup>51</sup> *The Tower* (1926) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 165.

<sup>52</sup> See, or rather watch the Boring Prophet in *Life of Brian* (1979) whom the protagonist encounters. The Boring Prophet turns a hierophant of unapprehended inspiration when silently uttering the words: „*There shall, in that time, be rumours of things going astray, erm, and there shall be a great confusion as to where things really are, and nobody will really know where lieth those little things [...] and the young shall not know where lieth the things possessed by their fathers...*”.

<sup>53</sup> Dáil speech by Éamon de VALÉRA, 4 May 1928.

<sup>54</sup> YEATS, *Collected Poems*, Macmillan, New York, 1952, 276.

*Yeats, Joyce and Shaw are names that make Ireland great.*<sup>55</sup>

Yeats and the rest of them. On top of that, Yeats's eloquence on questions of art and teaching Irish were often wept for. Finally, the National Film Institute of Ireland proudly presented a documentary: *W. B. Yeats: A Tribute* in 1950<sup>56</sup> which combined poetry with the green fields of Ireland and became immensely popular at the time.

### ***Art and the Irish mind***

Theory might have been clear, but practice was difficult. For Yeats, the line of argumentation was rooted in the knowledge of the „*ancient, cold, explosive, detonating impartiality*”<sup>57</sup> of the Irish mind. I would like to gather the most illuminative occasions and show how this knowledge was implemented. Yeats, the public man rejoiced at the opportunity in his *Autobiographies* because as opposed to the somewhat adagio reaction to poetry,

*[i]f I give a successful lecture [...] there is immediate effect; I am confident that on some point, which seems to me of great importance, I know more than other men, and I covet honour.*<sup>58</sup>

With Yeats in mind, therefore, it is well to understand that he was a *conscious* hierophant. A hierophant in the Senate who pinned down very early that „*I do not like to speak in this House unless on things I have studied – letters and art*”.<sup>59</sup> That is, when he considered himself not to be an expert on the subject, he stayed silent or made remarks on orthography – thus, contributing to the rigorousness of legal and financial bills. But in completely different matters, matters of art and mind, he felt at home.

The mind is its own theatre. After crimes and suicides clearly linked to modern films and books, an amendment came before the Senate proposing that children under sixteen shall not be admitted to cinema theatres. Thanks to the Earl of Wicklow who knew the Standing Orders of the House well enough, Yeats was allowed to finish his mournful remark, even though he had not the slightest intention to second this amendment. The poet's artistic imagination attempted to provide a universal answer, leaning towards the concessive once again.

---

<sup>55</sup> Seanad speech by Professor STANFORD, 2 May 1951.

<sup>56</sup> Mentions include but are not limited to: Senate speech by Dougal MCGUIRE on Central Fund Bill, 21 March 1951; Dáil speech by Mr CHILDERS on Estimates for Public Services, 31 May 1950; Dáil speech by Mr MCBRIDE on External Affairs, 12 July 1950; Dáil speech by Seosamh Ó MONGÁIN (in Irish) on Estimates for Public Services, 26 April 1950.

<sup>57</sup> YEATS, 'On the Boiler' Part III in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume V, Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'DONNELL, Scribner, New York, 1994, 243.

<sup>58</sup> YEATS, 'The Bounty of Sweden' In *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume III, Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'DONNELL, Douglas N. ARCHIBALD, Scribner, 1999, 392.

<sup>59</sup> Senate speech, 2 July 1924.

Reminiscent of the Abbey Theatre affair, he stated: „*I think you can leave the arts, superior or inferior, to the general conscience of mankind.*”<sup>60</sup>

In this connection, it is worthy to note another regenerative instance regarding the public: the second reading of the so-called Merrion Square (Dublin) Bill. Yeats had not only participated in the discussion because of that declared urge to contribute to letters and art. He had a lot to do with this bill personally, for he was a resident at N<sup>o</sup> 82 Merrion Square. Sean O’Casey described the constant danger surrounding the place in his fourth volume of third person singular-memoirs, *Inisfallen, Fare Thee Well*:

*Sean mounted the wide steps to the door which was Yeats’s dwelling place. Two Free State C. I. D. men stood in the shadow of the pillared doorway, planted there to prevent the assassination of the senator-poet [italics mine A. K.] by some too-ready Republican hand. Guns guarding the poet, thought Sean...*<sup>61</sup>

And Sean mused on about prospects of murder. A stark contrast between Yeats’s poetic recluse and public affairs becomes apparent from these lines, together with the detonating spirit of this specific Irish space and time. In the city and in the countryside, too, there was „*violence upon the roads: violence of horses*”.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, by then, the „*senator-poet*” epithet was given by a dramatist who was drawn to the Republican side, thus represents Republican views on the dangers of the time.

Perhaps even more interestingly, it is worth looking at an earlier account which is illustrative of Yeats’s stance in the eyes of the public – and also of another curious phenomenon. In the fifth poem of *Meditations in Time of Civil War: The Road at My Door*, „*war literally arrives*”<sup>63</sup> on the doorsteps of his country tower house in Ballylee:

*An affable Irregular,  
A heavily built, Falstaffian man  
Comes crackling jokes of civil war  
As though to die by gunshot were  
The finest play under the sun.*

*A brown Lieutenant and his men  
Half dressed in national uniform,  
Stand at my door, and I complain  
Of the foul weather, hail and rain,  
A pear-tree broken by the storm.*<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Senate speech, 7 June 1923.

<sup>61</sup> Sean O’CASEY, ‘With the Poet in Merrion Square’ In *Innisfallen, Fare Thee Well*, Macmillan, London & N Y, 1949, 169.

<sup>62</sup> *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen – VI* (1919) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 178.

<sup>63</sup> Edna LONGLEY, *Yeats and Modern Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 124.

<sup>64</sup> *Meditations in Time of Civil War – V – The Road at My Door* (1923) In YEATS, *The Works of*

The winding road to Ballylee certainly had visitors of all sorts in the course of the Civil War (1922-1923), an Irish Republican Army-man and then Free State government troops (*half* dressed in *national* uniform), whose presence must have been indicative of their acceptance of Yeats as an emblematic poet-senator. Their acceptance of both halves of Yeats's role was vital, as some senators' homes were burnt to the ground and their lives were threatened – as if to show that failure in either of these categories might result in unpleasantness. However, there is something else in these earlier lines I find striking: Yeats simply cannot or would not speak the common tongue with these groups. How is it possible that the eloquent poet comes up with nothing but the weather? One cannot help but think of Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*: „Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else”.<sup>65</sup> In times of civil war, it might not have been the sort of public with which he wished to resolve silence.

However, in the Merrion Square case, Yeats saw the need for transition and the official possibility to enact that transition. On top of that, his reasoning shows a favouring of the public – both *opinion* and *function* – to provide for the transfer of the said ground, its change into a public park. This imperious impulse, joining the crowd and the group of residents in Merrion Square to empower the square's commissioners to negotiate this matter is all the more intriguing in the light of his dread for the uneducated masses, the „*indifferent multitude*”<sup>66</sup>. The main opposition came from Senator Sir Bryan Mahon who insisted on the danger of mass-protests in the area. Yet, not even this word sounded as an alarm bell to the ears of Yeats who certainly had had his first fears triggered by the Russian revolution. This transition he considered a new pillar of Irish conscience and consciousness:

*I should like children to have a legal right to play in that Square. [...] It must enter into their life and memory for ever. [...] I do not think one ought to allow our temporary but possible discomfort for a few years to interfere [...]. I do not think we should take too seriously the interests, the fancies, or desires of even those admirable men who want a great demonstration upon Armistice Day. Armistice Day will recede. [...] It will grow less and less every year.*<sup>67</sup>

It is my impression that Yeats is more often than not accused of not stirring a foot from set traditions. Despite all these charges, he did propose to find purpose

---

William Butler Yeats, Ware, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994, 173.

<sup>65</sup> Oscar WILDE, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I, Part 4

<sup>66</sup> *Meditations in Time of Civil War* – VII – I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness (1923) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Ware, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994, 175.

<sup>67</sup> Senate speech, 9 March 1927.

in the *new* and not the *old* here – as well as regarding the forthcoming issue of Supreme Court robes – overstepping boundaries with daring beliefs to support each scheme. Despite having to wait until the 1970s for this to be realised, the gates of Merrion Square were eventually opened to the general public, residents threw away their keys of the private park and the sole aim of Yeats with this sort of change came true:

*I do not believe that in a hundred years any monument erected now will be very important. [...] But I believe in a hundred years the Square will be there if this scheme is carried out for the health of Dublin children and the delight of all citizens.*<sup>68</sup>

Nothing in Yeats's concept of change violates his sense of tradition. Or just as much as his cunning can be discerned from the first part of *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*:

*We too had many pretty toys when young:  
[...] habits that made old wrong  
melt down, as it were wax in the sun's rays.*<sup>69</sup>

The not unintentional pause at the end of the iambic pentameter line strikes us as „old wrong”, but parsing further we realise „old wrong melt down”; and for that matter, do „habits melt down” or did we have „habits” causing „old wrong melt down”? Yeats, by anticipating the arrival of a new era in the history of Ireland, would have liked to see a change that signifies something serious, surpassing „pretty toys”, more than „habits”; hence „desirable change” conquers all.

*[D]o you think that a very old man, grown old in the use of quite a different costume, would ever accept the change? Never. Impossible. If the change is desirable— there is no way out of it—the change would have to be imposed on the judges.*<sup>70</sup>

The sense is astonished by the wonder of the occasion to recreate tradition.

*It is not an unimportant thing we are discussing [...] because it will be for centuries if now at a time of revolution when we have a chance, we do not create a tradition. Now is our opportunity.*<sup>71</sup>

It is possible to argue that this is a forced relationship between creation and art; that it is artistic creation – „a thing he had studied” – only from the Yeatsian point of view. He may have wished to partake in the dynamics of some sort of

---

<sup>68</sup> Senate speech, 9 March 1927.

<sup>69</sup> *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* – I (1919) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 175.

<sup>70</sup> Senate speech, 22 July 1926.

<sup>71</sup> Senate speech, 22 July 1926.



creation. Nonetheless, on the grounds of being a man of letters, Yeats does not accept new or old as they are, for him, any tradition is bound to serve some sort of purpose – artistic or educative. It conjures up the tenet he might have heard from the respected friend, William Morris: „*Have nothing [...] that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.*”<sup>72</sup> Although the argument, that is, the amendment was defeated by one vote, in this connection, a part of his Lane Pictures speech comes to the fore:

*You will forgive me if I forget that I am occasionally a politician, and remember that I am always a man of letters and speak less diplomatically and with less respect for institutions and great names than is, perhaps, usual in public life.*<sup>73</sup>

Sir John Keane invokes it at the end of discussing the amendment, as contradictory to the lines of verse written by Yeats in 1916. What came as a response, not only redefined the poem, *All Things Can Tempt Me* in the light of six Senatorial years:

*I thank Senator Sir John Keane for his appropriate and friendly quotations from myself. I would like to say that when I talked of this „fool-driven land”—a good many years ago now— I meant that it was fool-driven in certain matters—poetry and the theatre— matters in which I felt I had a greater right to an opinion than I have in politics.*<sup>74</sup>

A flicker of an ironic smile is still there, but as much as the Senate amused him in the beginning, it wearied him towards the end. In the course of the six years, he stood his ground and carefully perambulated questions from an artistic, poetic point of view. Clearly, the arch from smile to ponderousness had been completed; Yeats had different aspirations in mind.

*It is time that I wrote my will;  
I choose upstanding men [...]   
They shall inherit my pride,  
The pride of people that were  
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,  
Neither to slaves that were spat on,  
Nor to the tyrants that spat.*<sup>75</sup>

\*

---

<sup>72</sup> William MORRIS, ‘*The Beauty of Life*’, a lecture before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design (19 February 1880), later published in *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London and Nottingham, 1878-1881* (1882).

<sup>73</sup> Senate speech, 14 July 1926.

<sup>74</sup> Senate speech, 22 July 1926.

<sup>75</sup> *The Tower* (1926) In YEATS, *The Works of William Butler Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 1994, 167.

## Conclusion

The poet is often charged with living in an ivory tower. In the case of Yeats, appearance did not debunk this myth: by the end of his Senate years, he had bought and finished renovating Ballylee Castle, a Hiberno-Norman tower house in County Galway, naming it Thoor (‘Tower’) Ballylee. Yet, the symphonic arrangement of poems, *The Tower* (1928) did not come from distant heights. As the illustrator Edmund Dulac observed: „Yeats was certainly detached than most, but his ivory tower had many doors and many windows all wide open to life”.<sup>76</sup> But discretion is the better part of valour, and in the autumn of 1928, he did not go up for re-election. As a dinner companion remembers:

*[H]e arose and made an impetuous gesture with his arms, yet there was ennui in it, saying he was to give his last speech in the Senate on October 10, but that would do no good, that he would ‘only make another of his impassioned speeches’ and the unenlightened would rule.*<sup>77</sup>

Although the smile diminished somewhat and the public man left his office, it was not the last time Yeats had a say in Irish or European politics: a later prose, *On the Boiler* is a representative piece. It is perhaps surprising that Yeats was not only a very determined and *conscious* hierophant but also someone who was conscious of being *unacknowledged* as legislator. William McCormack reckons that „Yeats has brought neither statesmanship nor academic political science to the Senate; he applied skills as a chairman and lobbyist.”<sup>78</sup> Yeats stated that he was a poet and the mouthpiece of a moderate minority in the *Saorstát Éireann*. As he opposed Republicans in most matters, the result was more often than not a rebuttal of his ideas. But he considered himself proud of being part of a minority, what he wished was to exercise some positive artistic influence on legislation. The First Senate greatly influenced the main principles and legislative foundations of the new state and I would hazard the statement that the poet acted upon the state: Yeats proved to be a poet-counsellor, a legislator, however unacknowledged, not merely to the Irish Free State of the time but also to Ireland of the coming times.

First of all, in the aftermath of 1928, Yeats’s circle was elevated to the level of cultural heritage: figures of the Anglo-Irish literary revival were given honourable mention in political bodies, their works exported as cultural commodities. In addition, it was Yeats who started merging arts into the political argumentative line of the Free State Senate. In 1925, he was first to quote a poem in the Senate,<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Edmund DULAC, *Without the Twilight*, Scattering Branches, ed. Stephen GWYNN, 135-144. In E. H. MIKHAIL, *Interviews and Recollections*, Vol. 1 & 2, 1977, 291.

<sup>77</sup> Richard EBERHART, *Memory of Meeting Yeats*, Literary Review, Rutherford, New Jersey, 1, Autumn 1957, 51-56.

<sup>78</sup> William J. MCCORMACK, *Blood Kindred: The Politics of W. B. Yeats and His Death*, Random House, 2011, 247.

<sup>79</sup> „I think I am the first person who has quoted a poem in the Seanad. I only do so because I am

Thomas William Rolleston's *Clonmacnoise* (as if to suggest there is no unbridgeable divide between poetry and practice: apropos of the Shannon Electricity Bill). Therefore, it is perhaps no coincidence that after 1928, the political rhetoric of the House started to include meandering poems of W. B. Yeats, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*<sup>80</sup> and others as buttresses of down-to-earth arguments.

All in all, Yeats's minute, intangible, cultural additions give a much deeper understanding of thought and have a much deeper impact on society than amendments finally lost or agreed to. It is that „*slow-growing coral*” Yeats hoped to be, Shelley's poet, who is „*the unacknowledged legislator of the world*”:

*For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.*<sup>81</sup>

---

*sure the poem will be, to use the appropriate words, 'a definite asset'.*” Senate speech, 10 June 1925. At another occasion, he invoked excerpts from the diaries of Samuel Pepys.

<sup>80</sup> Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, quoted by Sir John Keane on the Censorship of Publications Bill, on 11 April, 1929.

<sup>81</sup> Percy Bysshe SHELLEY, *A Defence of Poetry*, Ginn & Company, 1891, 6.

